

Zoe and the Swami

THE STORY OF A STRANGE EXPERIMENT IN SNAKE CHARMING

By Margaret Busbee Shipp

MRS. WARD recalled the many occasions which she had dignified as turning points in her son's life—her decision to remain in New York after her husband's death; the choice of Garren's prep school, of his university, of his profession; war and its reaction—these things and many more. Why, in her absorbed young motherhood she had felt that the worst was over when he outgrew his infant tendency to croup!

Everything which she had exaggerated as being important took its true place as trivial, insignificant, now that she was confronted with the actual crisis; for Garren had just told her of his engagement to Zoe, the dancer whose American début had been one of the sensations of the year. He had brought his happiness to his mother, as sunnily sure of her sharing it with him as he had been of her sympathy when he cut his thumb in his childhood, or of her rejoicing when he was elected captain of his football team.

Garren had been a year-old baby at the time of his father's death, and Mrs. Ward had poured all her hopes, her prayers, her

aspirations, into the single channel of his happiness and well-being. Now she was suddenly confronted with the stark fact that if youth chooses to ruin its life, there is nothing that maturity can do but hold its painful peace.

With her habit of trying to see her son's point of view as clearly as her own, she realized how compelling the force of attraction which drew him to Zoe must be, to make him fall in love with a girl absolutely outside of his own class. What seemed to her the most astounding tangent was to him the straight road to happiness. He was triumphant over his success in winning Zoe—heartbreakingly triumphant, it seemed to his mother, as she recalled the one occasion on which she had seen Zoe.

Garren had taken a box one evening, and his party arrived not long before Zoe's entrance. Her appearance was the signal for tumultuous applause.

"Did you ever see anything more deliberately indifferent than her manner?" exclaimed Freddy Wright. "She manages to convey the idea that she is hardly conscious of that noise—neither annoyed nor

gratified by it, merely waiting for it to be over. New York is so familiar with the glad-I-please-you type that it rather likes her cool insolence."

There was an amazing vivacity in the dance which followed—an intense aliveness, as if every pulse in her body was magnificently *aware*. It was no wonder that jaded critics gave her a grudging word of praise, and that novices could not find enough bizarre adjectives to describe her grace, her charm, her alien beauty. Bare to her slender thighs, she wore a short tunic in an Oriental texture of yellowish brown, and a strikingly audacious headress.

"I'm bitterly disappointed in her clothes," remarked Dr. Hall. "I had understood that Zoe dressed merely in a handkerchief, and waved that most of the time!"

Garren had frowned slightly. Mrs. Ward had thought it was because her son was afraid that Hall might make some dubious remark before Betty Erskine. Afterward she remembered that his eyes were riveted on the enchanting movements of that slender and lovely body.

He had managed to meet Zoe the next day, he now confided to his mother, and he had seen her every day since, though she had been tremendously discreet about appearing in public with him. Her manager—a fat, froglike fellow, even to the warts—was mad about her, and as he had signed a liberal contract with her for the following year, Zoe was unwilling to antagonize him; so she had decided that their engagement must be kept secret until the end of the season. It wasn't very long to wait, and then he would insist upon their marriage. It was the most incredible thing in the world that a beauty and a genius like Zoe could content herself with an ordinary man like himself!

"*Ordinary!*" his mother gasped, and was silent.

His clean good looks, his dear smile, his assured income and excellent prospects, his long inheritance from honorable New England and Virginia forbears—these were "ordinary" gifts to place at the feet of a dancing girl, with a fat frog for one's possible rival!

Garren laughed and kissed her.

"Dear little mother! It's a blessed arrangement that a man has one person in all the world who sees him in heroic stature, and never in actual life size. I want you to call on her, dear. Her apartment will

show you the sort of girl she really is. There's nothing tawdry or garish about it—it's like a bit of the woods in the heart of New York."

II

MRS. WARD thought the place was rather like a jungle, when she was ushered into the living room of Zoe's apartment; but it was undeniably charming. The wall was hidden under leaf-green hangings. There was a dull, earth-brown rug on the floor, as soft as dead leaves in a forest. In the deeply recessed windows were ferns and magnificent palms. Mrs. Ward was peculiarly sensitive to odors, and she enjoyed the mingled scents of the ferns, the moist earth, and a heavily perfumed tropical flower which was unfamiliar to her.

Suddenly she was startled, and turned apprehensively to find that the girl had entered the room. So noiseless was her foot-fall—the light step of the dancer—that the visitor had not heard her come in.

Then all impressions were submerged in the sense of Zoe's arresting beauty. Her eyes, like clear jewels, met Mrs. Ward's with their direct, impelling gaze. Her lips, beautifully curved and thinly cut, were deep crimson; her skin was satin soft in texture. She wore a street frock of her favorite brown and a hat that brought out all the tawny brown tints of her hair. She had been on the point of going out shopping, she explained, but of course she was glad to see Mrs. Ward.

It was plain after that one long, deliberate scrutiny that she classified her visitor as a person of negligible importance, though to be dealt with politely as Garren's mother. In fact, many of Garren's friends had the same impression about Mrs. Ward, as a dear little neutral-tinted mother who never nagged, and who assumed small authority.

Mrs. Ward had dressed with studied care for that interview. She wore a tweed suit which had done good service. She had hunted up a hat of the season before, and had even removed its redeeming aigrette. She did not look as she usually did—a pleasing, mature gentlewoman, well dressed, but not conspicuously modish. In fact, when she confronted herself in the glass, she thought with complete satisfaction:

"I look just about as important as a small speckled hen!"

She knew that the more inoffensive and dull she appeared, the less on guard with

her Zoe would be; and this was her only chance to find out something for herself about the girl who was to be her son's wife.

She began to prattle to Zoe of her boy, his tastes, his habits, his teething idiosyncrasies, his succession of dogs. The dancer was bored—politely, at first, and then frankly—by the artless mother prattle. Dull as she was deliberately endeavoring to be, Mrs. Ward thought with a pang how sweet Betty Erskine's eyes were as she listened to some trifling incident of Garren's boyhood.

At last Mrs. Ward was on her feet, making her adieus. When she reached the street, her face was pale and drawn, as if she had been breathing bad air.

III

GARREN did not especially care about the dinner which his mother insisted upon having soon afterward, but he consented when he saw that her heart was set upon it. He might as well introduce his fiancée to "the bunch" at one time as another. To himself he said "the bunch," but in the unspoken depth of his heart he stifled a pang that Betty Erskine and Zoe were such different types that they would never prove congenial—and Betty and he had been such wonderful pals always!

Mrs. Ward lived in the comfortable home that she had occupied ever since her marriage, though shops were beginning to encroach upon the neighborhood. The interior was unusually charming, with the mahogany and the portraits that she had brought years before from her Virginia home. She had transformed the whole third story into a ballroom, and many and merry were the parties held there.

The evening of the dinner did not begin auspiciously for Garren, because not until they were in his car, on the way to the dinner, did Zoe realize that it was to be in his home, instead of a restaurant. To Zoe, at her ease in any restaurant from Tokyo to Paris, a perfectly appointed dinner in a private home had the annoyance of the unfamiliar.

"The bunch" surrounded her, however, and made much of her. They praised her dancing, and begged that she would be generous to them later, until Garren felt boyishly elated over the tact and good fellowship of "the jolliest crowd on earth."

It was annoying that the one false note should come from his gentle, self-effacing

mother, who had elected to invite a guest of her own to this intimate circle. She explained him, with deference, as "the swami."

"Of course a Hindu cannot eat our fare, so he will be served alone in the breakfast room, as is his preference; but you shall meet him afterward."

It was unusual in that set to have professional entertainers, as they were abundantly able to entertain themselves, so the presence of the swami was a matter of some speculation.

"Will he make a tree grow from a bean, and climb to the top of it?" asked one of the girls. "I've always longed to see that done!"

"Just so it's a stunt and not a poem," said Freddy Wright; "but I know Mrs. Ward wouldn't let us in for that." He turned to Betty Erskine, who sat on the other side of him. "The big trick in Hindu poetry seems to be that it makes about as much sense to read the words backward, forward, or alternately. Gee whiz-z-z, how she daz-z-z-zles me!"

The elongated z's were an unwilling tribute to the girl at Garren's right. She was clad—perhaps that is not the exact word, where so much of the lovely body was bare—in a gown of amber tulle, embroidered in metallic threads, with a train of brown velvet. A turban of dull gold sequins with creamy yellow paradise plumes brought out all the beauty of her clear eyes, like pale-colored jewels. Her beauty had such a vivacious quality that the other women at the table seemed devitalized in comparison.

"If she had half as much on her body as she has trailing on the floor, she'd be completely covered," thought Freddy, but he did not say it aloud.

He caught the puzzled questioning in Betty's voice as she lowered it to ask:

"Is that wonderful creature going to dance for us, actually?"

He let her have it straight, his heart aching for what he saw—what surely she must guess from Garren's look of infatuation.

"It's rather more than that, I think. Garry's not been playing around with us much this last month, Betty. Zoe seems to have fascinated him—er—temporarily."

Betty did not reply.

"Good girl!" Freddy silently approved. "Took the blow in the face, and didn't bat an eyelid. She's a true little sport!"

But beneath the table Betty's slender

hands were locked in her lap, twisting together until she felt the pain.

IV

THE dinner passed off gayly. Secure of herself, of her power, Zoe dominated it all as easily as she held her audiences.

Mrs. Ward began to have a sick fear that she had made a mistake. She had everything at stake—her son's love for her, his faith in her. She tried to take her usual gentle part in the gay chatter, but she could not follow what was being said. She no longer saw Garry as he was, clean-cut, long-limbed, straightforward, a son to rejoice the heart. He was the laughing baby whose young father lay dead in the adjoining room—the baby to whose protection she had dedicated her life.

Vaguely she seemed to hear the butler's discreet cough. She came back to her surroundings and rose a little unsteadily to her feet.

Coffee and liqueurs were served in an adjoining room, where the swami joined them. In his white Indian garments, his head turbaned in white, he made an impressive figure, so unusual in those surroundings that his appearance must have upset the equilibrium of the well trained butler. The swami had seated himself next to Zoe. As Dennis attempted to light a cigarette for him, there was somehow a flash of fire. Zoe's, sweeping paradise plumes had caught fire, but were instantly extinguished, as the swami, with great presence of mind, quickly slapped out the tiny flames.

A furious exclamation sprang from Zoe's lips. Dennis, mumbling incoherent apologies, vanished from the room, to explain dazedly to sympathetic hearers below stairs that it was not his fault, anyhow.

The Hindu, looking straight into Zoe's eyes, narrowed and bright with anger, spoke to her soothingly in a strange tongue, which the other guests assumed to be his own. Then he gently removed the ruined head-dress with its scorched plumes. She moved her head uneasily, but did not take her eyes from his face.

"She will dance for you now," he said to the others in his slow, precise English.

"It's too soon after dinner, isn't it, Zoe?" Garren asked solicitously. "Though you didn't eat as much as a humming bird, for that matter!"

She shook her head impatiently at him, her eyes still fixed on the swami.

The swami took a flutelike instrument from the folds of his robe, and played a strangely poignant prelude. It slipped into a curious, half barbaric strain, monotonous, yet with a note of command. The girl rose, her body swaying rhythmically. Then that small group of onlookers saw a dance which they could never forget until memory itself was forgotten.

Zoe caught her train and twisted its soft brown folds around one arm, but it was not more pliant than the movements of her sinuous, exquisite body, with a grace that seemed more than mortal.

It was as if they entered with her into the kingdom of the dance—an empire older than the oldest throne, a dynasty stretching beyond human knowledge, gathering its myrmidons from the four corners of the earth, as glad as youth, as resistless as the tide, as capricious as the wind, as enduring as time.

She seemed to pass still farther back—before recorded time. Was she portraying a dance unknown to mankind by name or chronicle, far older than the secret dances of the hill tribes of Hindustan, or the imitative dances of a primitive civilization, picturing the chase or the battle or the victory—older than the devil dances of the Veddahs? It was as if she glimpsed a prehistoric earth before the beasts and the creeping things knew the dominion of man.

Mrs. Ward stole a glance at her son. He seemed less aware than the others of the magic of the dance, for his eyes were on Zoe's face, studying the subtle change which had come over it.

He had never before seen the girl without one of the elaborate coiffures she affected. Now for the first time he saw her head absolutely bare. How strangely it was shaped—flattened slightly, the forehead low and sloped back! How unblinking the eyes were, with their jewel-like clearness! How evil the thin lips and the restless, darting tongue!

He shook his mind free from the hideous likeness which occurred to him. Did his friends think they saw—what he denied to himself that he saw? He glanced furtively at their faces, but they were rapt, as if under the spell of a common fascination.

What was this thing that Zoe was dancing now? What hot, revolting secret of the jungle was the swami bringing to view? The dancing grew swifter and fiercer. The music had a dull, reiterated note, like the

beating of summer rains steaming against the heated earth. There was the thrill of lush growth, of mating.

It became unendurable, intolerable, to the man who watched. He crossed in a stride to the swami, put a hand roughly on his shoulder, and spoke in a voice of harsh authority:

"Enough of this! You are tiring her. Can't you see she is—"

The sentence was never finished. As Garren put that angry hand on the Hindu's shoulder, Zoe darted swiftly at him. There was a girl's scream, and then a man's anguished cry:

"Mother! Mother darling, are you hurt?"

It had happened with incredible swiftness. There were those present who swore that when Zoe darted forward, her neck dilated broadly as she struck at Garren.

But love was swifter still, for Mrs. Ward's arm came in between, and her wrist bore the marks of Zoe's teeth.

Zoe stood vibrantly still, like one awakened but dazed, with her unblinking eyes fixed on the swami. It was as if they two were alone in an alien world.

He spoke to her soothingly, in the same strange tongue. Then he turned to Hall, who was examining Mrs. Ward's arm.

"You are doctor? Yes? There is no big danger, though the cauterize may be wiser. I grieve much, *mem-sahib*, that you are hurt. Zoe very tired from much dance. Shall I take her home?"

There was a furious buzz of protest, silenced by Mrs. Ward's imperative—

"Let them go at once, please!"

V

It was after the last reluctant guest had gone, and the doctor had cauterized the wound, that mother and son were alone together again.

Garren, pale as death, and shaken to the depths of his soul, laid his head against his mother's on her pillow, as he had done hundreds of times as a penitent small boy.

"My precious, bravest little mother!" he began stumbly. "When I watched that dance, different from anything I had ever seen her dance before, and when I saw her horrible flat head"—he shuddered violently—"some unaccountable repulsion awoke in me, but I thought it too late to break off in honor. Then, when she struck you—you! I've been such a headlong sort of a

damned fool, I don't deserve such a mother as you, or such—such a friend as Betty. Did you see, mother, that she jumped forward too? She was willing to risk herself to save me from that—that— Little brave Betty! I seemed to realize in a flash that I should have queered my life forever if she was out of it. It's you who saved us all, darling! How did you guess—what I cannot yet make up my mind to believe?"

She laid a tender hand on his bent head. He apprehended that there were depths in his mother—as perhaps in all instinctive, protective motherhood—which he had never sounded.

"When I went to see her, Garry, I was wondering why she had created that jungle to live in. Suddenly there was something—I can hardly call it an odor—it was more an emanation, but distinct to my sensitiveness in that regard. I turned in fright, to find that Zoe had entered the room. I thought I must be mistaken, though I had never before been mistaken in the proximity of any of *them*. Haven't you heard your uncle tell of the time we were camping in the Blue Ridge, when I was a small child, and I came whimpering to him, vainly trying to describe a sensation I had no words for, and he found a rattlesnake in a clump of blackberries? I can't define it even now, but it sickens me like bad air. I stayed talking to her for a long time, watching the pose of her body as she relaxed, and always it was as if something inherent in me was on guard. When I left her, I went to church. I wanted to think quietly, not to be unjust or hysterical. A missionary was making a talk about different forms of pagan worship, and when he spoke of the ancient 'serpent well' he explained the name 'Zohemoth' as a Hebrew word for 'serpent.' *Zohemoth, the serpent*—I couldn't hear another word! The next day I sought out the swami."

"Who in Sam Hill is he, dear, and where did you find him?"

"Of course he isn't a swami, but he is a Hindu. I paid him a thousand dollars, and left everything to him. It was his suggestion that he must get Zoe's head bare. He was advertised as the most expert snake charmer ever brought from Asia, and I went to the circus and watched him with his trained"—she hesitated, and brought out the word with a shudder—"cobras."

Her son's arms closed hard around her, his lips against the bandaged wrist.